

Family matters: The role of university museums in intergenerational learning

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Abstract

Working within university museums in England, both museum educators and faculty staff are comfortable with pre-defined formal learning groups and subjects that 'tie into the curriculum'. However, when engaging with 'the wider community' there is no curriculum and groups are self-selecting and ephemeral – so how do we design, market and map this kind of informal learning? One method of attracting informal or 'free-choice' learners is through the development of a family learning program. Such programs often represent a marketing coup and a boost to visitor figures but they also raise questions about style of delivery, modes of assessment and, most importantly, the validity of such learning within a university context.

This paper discusses how family learning can meet university public engagement objectives and provide university students with key transferable skills through innovative 'family learning volunteer' programs. Finally, it illustrates that intergenerational learning is an important area of potential growth for university museums.

What do we mean by the term 'family'?

Before attempting to define family learning, it is perhaps helpful to examine the term 'family' as it can mean different things in different cultures and countries. To some it is the extended family of parents, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. To others it is the nuclear family of parent/s and child/ren or perhaps the step or 'blended' family which occurs when separated/widowed parents form a new relationship and two families join or blend together.

For the purposes of this paper, and also in the programs that are run at the University of Reading Museums & Special Collections, 'family' means adults and children together; what FALK & DIERKING (2000: 110n2) describe as "an intergenerational group of adults and children who self-define themselves as family (in other words not necessarily biologically related)". Whilst it is appreciated that families can also be adult couples or made up of all adult members, as museum visitors, they tend to behave as adult groups do rather than as adults with children do (FALK & Dierking 2000).

What is 'family learning'?

Family learning is a fluid term with different meanings in different countries and hence attempting to pin down family learning pedagogy is also difficult. In Ireland, family learning is family literacy, enabling adults to gain literacy skills but not engaging with the children. In Poland, family learning is about parenting skills and family interaction. In the UK, family learning is often linked to numeracy and literacy skills of the whole family. The University of Reading Museums and Special Collections follow the practical definition of family learning described by ALEXANDER & CLYNE (1995). Family learning is identified as having five distinct aspects:

- informal learning within the family;
- family members learning together;
- learning about roles, relationships and responsibilities in relation to the stages of family life, including parenting education;
- learning how to understand, take responsibility and make decisions in relation to wider society, in which the family is a foundation for citizenship;
- learning how to deal with agencies that serve families.

The common feature of these five aspects is intergenerational-learning, adults and children learning together. It is collaborative learning in a social context, and this is the essence of family learning.

Why university museums and family learning?

In 2004 the University Museums (UK) Group published the advocacy report, *A National Resource for the 21st Century* in which it reported how university museums having started life as academic institutions were moving forward with social engagement to engage with local communities and schools. In encouraging lifelong learning

“university museums are particularly well placed to help people explore new areas of interest through liaison with their Extra-mural or Continuing Education departments. Programs run in collaboration with FE colleges, senior citizens, volunteers of all ages and Friends organizations extend the university’s community far beyond the campus confines” (UMUKG 2004: 16)

Lifelong learning extends equally to the other end of the spectrum and can and should include children below school age and their families, as well as those of school age and above. Families are our first places of learning and are formative influences in peoples’ lives. They are places of ‘deep learning’ which can touch all other aspects of our lives in some way (HAGGART 2000).

Many UK universities have taken such ideas on with public engagement. *The Beacons for Public Engagement* wiki states that “engagement is about getting people involved” (MANNERS 2008), with the National Coordinating Centre aiming to:

“break down barriers and open up higher education to the public. Universities will be more welcoming and accessible, and people in higher education will find their research, teaching and learning enriched by contact with the outside world”.

The Manchester Beacon project “connects people, places and knowledge, making the resources of both Manchester and Salford’s universities and cultural assets accessible to all”. For Manchester, this clearly includes families with the work of Manchester Metropolitan University artist Lynne Setterington being enjoyed by families at The Great Indoors, a free family event attended by over 10 000 people (NCCPE 2008).

Both the University of Reading and the University of Oxford museums see families as a core audience and one which deserves attention and specific programming. They have both taken part in a region-wide family friendly museums program and have contributed to family friendly training for other museums. In 2005, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History and the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford won the Guardian newspaper *Kids in Museums* award in recognition of the work they do with families and children (KENNEDY 2005).

What do ‘family friendly’ museums have to do with our students?

For students at the University of Reading, being a learning program volunteer gives them

- non-academic credits which are added to their degree or postgraduate transcripts;
- career experience and insight;
- transferable skills and the knowledge that they are a positive representative of their university in the local community.

Family learning volunteers assist with workshops, drop-in sessions, *Toddler Time* and even museum sleep-overs. Their dedication and enthusiasm for the museums and their subject matter is transmitted to those families who attend.

Aside from formally participating in family sessions via volunteering, students are increasingly attending the family sessions as participants. As Reading, along with many UK universities continues to grow its 'mature' student population, many of these students have their own families and look for places to visit and activities for them at weekends and during holidays. What better place than the university museum to have fun and be together, and for the children, an opportunity to see where their parents or grandparents study and find out more about what they do?

For the universities, along with their continuing education departments, their museums are often the 'public face' or 'front door' to the local community. If they truly wish to engage with local communities and play a vibrant and important role in their neighborhood, they must place an importance on working with families.

Family learning and the University of Reading's Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology and Museum of English Rural Life

The Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology was founded in the early 20th century and named after Professor P.N. Ure, the first Professor of Classics at Reading (1911 to 1946). Although the title of the Museum includes 'Greek Archaeology', the Ure Museum also has a collection of Egyptian material.

The Ure Museum is used as a research resource by scholars from all over the world, as well as in teaching University of Reading students, and increasingly as a source for teaching groups from local schools and other universities. The renewal of its learning environment, launched in 2005, furthers Percy Ure's aim "to give life and variety to the study of Greek History" and has enabled the museum to further engage with its wider community, including families and young children.

One way in which the Ure Museum engages with families is through its popular fish mummification workshops. The workshops are cross curricular in science and history, allowing museum staff to engage with those families who are already interested in Ancient Egypt (which is studied in the history curriculum in England by children between the ages of 7–11) extend their school knowledge and encourage them to discover the science in everyday life (or death!).

Staff prepare a fish mummy prior to the session. The dehydrated and preserved fish is used to encourage the families to make comparisons and contrasts with material in the museum's collection. During the session, staff gut and prepare a fresh fish for mummification, showing the families which organs were stored in canopic jars and why and how the natural salts of the Nile were used in the dehydration process. Families then make their own mummy (making a pipe cleaner frame), covering it with linen strips and sealing it with pink PVA glue to simulate the Gum Arabic and Rose Madder used to seal and color some mummies. Finally, families make a sarcophagus and decorate it with hieroglyphs and symbols.

Many parents bring their children along to the workshops because they wish to support what their children are doing at school, as FALK & DIERKING surmise "educational value may often be an important factor in family choice of outing" (FALK & DIERKING 1992). For some of the children who have developed or are developing 'islands of expertise' (CROWLEY & JACOBS 2002) in Egyptology, such activities add further to their enjoyment of, and interest in, the topic. Such workshops could easily be just for children, but the parents/carers enjoy themselves just as much as the children, often learning from them as the traditional roles of 'teacher' or 'leader' and 'learner' or 'follower' are reversed in this collaborative learning environment.

"Parents mediate children's experiences in and out of museums to help weave multiple moments of learning into broader informal knowledge about academic disciplines." (CROWLEY 2002)

The Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) was established in 1951 with the aim of preserving and celebrating English rural traditions at a time of rapid and irreversible change. MERL houses collections of objects, archives and books relating to the English countryside which have been 'designated' of national importance (MUSEUMS, LIBRARIES & ARCHIVES COUNCIL 2009).

The Museum moved to its new home in 2005 and the state of the art storage conditions and permanent exhibition house objects, books and archival documents which are used as a research resource by scholars from the UK and around the world, and for teaching museology and the history of the countryside to University of Reading students. Primary schools (pupils age 5–11) use the museum to teach history, science, literacy and art.

The museum's forward plan identified families and under fives as target audiences, and booked workshops, drop-in activities and *Toddler Time* followed. *Toddler Time* has been running for 18 months and was inspired by the Renaissance South West 2007 report *Communicating with Objects: Children under fifth engaging with museums*.

Toddler Time runs every Friday between 1–2 pm during local school term time. The sessions are drop-in and scheduled on a day and at a time when there is the least activity for under fives in the local area. The time was also chosen to allow parents with an older child at school enough time to collect them at the end of the school day.

Toddler Time is for both parents/carers and their children aged 2–4 years. The hour long session is divided into three 20 minute segments of singing (nursery rhymes, children's songs relating to rural life, e.g. Old MacDonald had a farm); a craft activity relating to the museum's collections or garden and 'free play' on the 'magic carpet', allowing the children and parents/carers a chance to socialize and play with rural themed toys and books.

Toddler Time helps both parents/carers and young children to feel comfortable in both a museum and an academic space. It fosters a sense of belonging and enjoyment from the learning and socializing with both other children, parents and museum staff and volunteers.

Alice, aged 2 years and 8 months has been attending the sessions with her mother since TODDLER TIME started last year. Alice is an only child and attends other playgroups and pre-school sessions with her mum, who is a stay-at-home mum. For Alice, there is only one museum, MERL, and every time she passes the building with her mum, she asks to come in. When Alice attends *Toddler Time*, she greets the session leader by name and joins the other families on the mat ready to start singing. After the session, Alice and her mum, along with some of the other children and parents, will either look around the museum or go and play in the garden. For them, this is their museum; an exciting, interesting place that encourages curiosity and learning, just as universities do.

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